

MARCH 2011

Forging a Libya Strategy

Policy Recommendations for the Obama Administration

POLICY BRIEF



By Andrew M. Exum and Zachary M. Hosford

The United States and its allies are at war in Libya. Whether or not the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) authorizing force amounted to a declaration of war, the moment the United States and its allies resorted to acts of force to achieve what had thus far eluded them through peaceable means, they went to war.¹

Consequently, the Obama administration entered into the third American war of the 21st century in a country where the United States has few real interests. In contrast to its neighbor, Egypt – a country of 83 million people – Libya has just 6.5 million people, barely three percent of the world’s proven oil reserves and has never been a bellwether in the Arabic-speaking world.² The interests the United States does have in Libya, such as protecting civilians and providing momentum to the revolutionary fervor sweeping the broader region, come at a potentially high cost by exposing the United States to considerable risk of protracted and resource-intensive conflict.

In addition, the United States and its allies are militarily and financially strained, in part, by costly occupations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The

establishment and maintenance of a no-fly zone alone could cost between 1.18 billion and 3.4 billion dollars over a six-month period – even with the United States transitioning to an indirect role in support of its allies. That cost could rise since allied operations in Libya have expanded beyond a no-fly zone to include attacks on ground forces. These operations would either be paid for by the U.S. Congress through a supplement to the budget of the Department of Defense or would force the U.S. military to reduce funds allotted for training and maintenance.³

But the military operations in Libya are also incurring opportunity costs. As the United States once again intervenes militarily, competing spending priorities, both foreign and domestic, are ignored. Such operations shift the U.S. focus away from countries like Iraq and Afghanistan (which still include over 130,000 U.S. troops), South and East Asia, and other strategically and economically critical regions. This leaves many to question why the United States and its allies are devoting resources to a country of relatively low strategic importance in North Africa.⁴ Though the Department of Defense allocates money in its budget for contingencies, operations in Libya will likely erase whatever cuts in domestic spending have been made by the U.S. Congress in 2011.⁵

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE MAR 2011		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Forging a Libya Strategy: Policy Recommendations for the Obama Administration				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Center for a New American Security,1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW Suite 403,Washington,DC,20004				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES supported in part by DOD					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 6	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

The decision to go to war in Libya also stands in marked contrast to the administration's deliberations on strategy and resources in Afghanistan in the spring and fall of 2009. However one judges the decision to send more U.S. troops and materiel to Afghanistan, the decision-making process itself was careful, deliberate and rooted in discussions of U.S. interests, strategic goals and planning assumptions. When the president decided to escalate the war in Afghanistan, he was undoubtedly haunted by deliberations that did *not* take place prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

With respect to Libya, by contrast, the president and his aides appear to have been haunted not so much by the invasions of Iraq or Afghanistan but by ghosts of the 1990s. The lessons of intervention in the Balkans – and *non*-intervention in Rwanda – meant the humanitarian consequences of what might happen if the United States did not intervene in Libya colored every decision and gave a sense of urgency to the decision-making process.⁶ Assuming Moammar Gadhafi would have made good on his threat to show no mercy to those in the rebel-controlled city of Benghazi, the administration and its allies in the international community indeed succeeded in averting the deaths of untold numbers of civilians.

Immediate U.S. Interests

Because military intervention in Libya does not directly affect vital U.S. national security interests and because no thorough planning process appears to have preceded this intervention, the Obama administration finds itself in a quandary.⁷ Although the president's most vociferous critics have accused the administration of "dithering" on Libya, the reality is that the deliberations that preceded military intervention seem to have occurred too quickly for the United States to firmly establish its policy, identify its strategic aims and question its own assumptions about the environment in which it was

about to enter. The administration is thus left with a series of activities untethered to a broader strategic framework. Obama administration officials note various "lines of operation" currently being conducted by our nation's diplomats, aid workers, military officers and officials from the Department of Treasury, but these disparate activities do not yet amount to a coherent strategy. However, now that the United States is involved in military operations in Libya, the most prudent course of action for the Obama administration is to more finely assess its security interests in light of the possible outcomes and make corresponding policy decisions to bring the war to an end.

First, the United States should minimize its commitment to Libya. This would enable the United States to devote its resources to more critical issues in the region and elsewhere. In the Middle East, U.S. security and economic interests are more directly affected by the democratizing trends in countries other than Libya. To begin with, the United States should be utilizing diplomacy and development tools to address the deteriorating political situation in Yemen, to counter troubling authoritarian trends in Iraq and Bahrain and to formulate an international response to the behavior of the al-Assad regime in Syria. But the Libyan war also prevents the United States from devoting the proper attention to other global interests.

Second, the United States has a strong interest in the successful hand-off of military operations to an international coalition. NATO has agreed to take command of the military operations, but U.S. interests would be best served if the coalition were more diverse in nature – including multiple Arab countries making substantive contributions – and intent on winding down military operations. Further, Libya has a greater impact on the security interests of Europe than on those of the United States and as such, U.S. and European policy makers will likely

make different calculations about how to further prosecute the war.

With those interests in mind, the United States faces numerous potential outcomes in Libya. The following are the best- and worst-case scenarios.

Potential Outcomes

The best possible outcome for the United States and its allies both in Libya and within the international community is for two major events to occur: Moammar Gadhafi, his family and their closest aides striking a deal, which allow them to leave Libya and take refuge in exile; and the execution of an orderly transition to a new, peaceful and democratic government that respects human rights and international law.

Given the relative lack of enduring U.S. interests in Libya, the burden of the responsibility to support Libya's peaceful transition to democratic rule should not fall to the United States, and U.S. policy makers should avoid any large commitment of financial, diplomatic or military resources. However, if France, the United Kingdom and other regional partners are not able to garner the finances or domestic support necessary to maintain the lead on these actions, the United States will face strong pressure to continue its role.

The most dangerous outcome for the United States is also the most likely, which is a stalemate that prolongs U.S. and allied military intervention in Libya. The relative lack of sophistication and organization among rebel fighting forces means they may be unable to regain the momentum in Libya and defeat Gadhafi's forces in open combat absent significant direct and indirect support from U.S. and allied militaries – which is not explicitly authorized by UNSCR 1973 and might not be supported by the U.S. Congress.

A stalemate in Libya would effectively result in a *de facto* partition of the country with a severely under-

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governed and disorganized safe haven in eastern Libya for the rebels that could provide refuge for various militant and criminal groups capable of exporting violence and instability to other countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Such a scenario would prolong U.S. and allied military intervention as only a major Western investment in developing the independent governance, economic and security force capacity of eastern Libya would be likely to forestall this outcome. However, such an investment is highly unlikely due to the overarching fiscal constraints facing the United States and NATO countries and competing priorities.

Policy Recommendations for the United States

Ironically, given the way in which President Obama has labored to be different from his predecessor in both rhetoric and action in the Middle East, the least bad policy option for the United States is to pursue a policy of regime change in Libya. Moammar Gadhafi must leave before the threat to civilians ends, which allows the United States and its allies to conclude their hastily planned involvement. At the same time, the United States cannot justify unlimited expenditure of U.S. resources in Libya given competing priorities elsewhere. Simply stopping direct U.S. military operations is necessary, but not sufficient, as allied military intervention might lead to a stalemate. What follows are policy recommendations focused on ending the Gadhafi regime while limiting U.S. expenditure of blood or treasure.

USE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE INCENTIVES TO FORCE GADHAFI FROM POWER

The United States and its allies have a variety of means available to create both positive and negative incentives for Moammar Gadhafi and his family to leave Libya. The most promising means for forcing Gadhafi from power may, in fact, be non-violent: the new regime of international financial sanctions against the Gadhafi regime has been unusually swift and comprehensive. The Libyan economy, almost exclusively dependent on oil exports, is not at all diverse, and the Libyan dinar has no real value outside Libya, which means the Gadhafi regime is heavily dependent on foreign currency reserves. The United States has already moved to seize 32 billion dollars in regime assets, and the international community is moving to seize more.⁸ Libya appears to control over 140 tons of gold – reportedly worth 6.5 billion dollars at today's prices – but it would be difficult for the Gadhafi regime to conduct large transactions with such an unwieldy and illiquid asset.⁹

On the positive side of the ledger, the United States should press an African or Arab nation to accept Moammar Gadhafi and his family into exile. Although the Libyan leader has thus far demonstrated his defiance to the suggestion that he would go into exile, and although human rights organizations would balk at the idea of Gadhafi leaving Libya a free man, the departure of Libya's dictator might end what promises to be a protracted and bloody civil war. U.S. officials have already hinted at negotiations leading to his peaceful departure.¹⁰ The United States would simultaneously need to work behind the scenes to ensure that the possibility that Gadhafi will be tried by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity will not create a disincentive to his leaving power.¹¹

HALT DIRECT MILITARY OPERATIONS

For the moment, the Arabic-speaking world is behind Libya's rebels.¹² But there is also concurrent

wariness toward any Western military intervention in the region, and this wariness will only grow over time, particularly if there are civilian casualties as a result of allied operations. Now that the U.S.-led coalition has seemingly prevented a humanitarian crisis through punishing naval attacks and air strikes on Libyan military targets, the United States should refrain from further direct military operations as part of the NATO-led coalition in Libya.

For the immediate future, the United States should only contribute military assets that fill capability gaps in coalition forces conducting operations related to the enforcement of the no-fly zone and arms embargo. This might include the use of U.S. early warning, communications, air-to-air refueling and surveillance aircraft. However, if the employment of these capabilities becomes too costly, is ineffective, unduly constrains U.S. forces or negatively impacts the U.S. image in the region, the administration should halt these operations as well. Ideally, the United States will line up both the political and financial support for the Arab states for the continuation of these operations. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have agreed to assist in the maintenance of the no-fly zone, but this contribution is less significant than it might seem since the allied coalition appears to have preemptively destroyed or otherwise rendered ineffective any Libyan aircraft capable of violating the airspace restriction.

HELP BUILD A COALITION TO PROVIDE NON-MILITARY SUPPORT

The cessation of U.S. involvement in direct military operations might also increase the likelihood that the United States can expand the coalition in other ways. The administration should work to build support among the nations of Africa, Europe and the Arabic-speaking world to provide aid to the people of Libya – including police trainers, rule-of-law specialists and all the other means necessary

for successful stabilization operations. It might be difficult for the United States to amass a robust coalition while relinquishing its leadership role, but that is nonetheless the best option. Without the significant contributions of other countries, the United States might be compelled to involve itself in another costly commitment to a post-conflict state.

BE WILLING TO ACCEPT THE STATUS QUO ANTE BELLUM

Given the limited U.S. interests in Libya, the United States may choose to disengage if the current efforts fail to meet most U.S. objectives. If Moammar Gadhafi does not relinquish power, it is entirely possible that he will outlast the NATO-led military coalition and that he will cling to power, albeit isolated and weakened. Should the allied intervention end with Gadhafi still in power, and he again threatens military action against anti-government rebels and civilians, the United States should not re-engage militarily.

The Obama administration, meanwhile, will have plenty of other opportunities – in Syria, Egypt, Bahrain and elsewhere – to support the popular revolutions and demonstrations in the Arabic-speaking world. Egypt, for example, faces an almost impossibly constricted timeline for its presidential elections this fall. U.S. election monitors and democracy promotion initiatives will be helpful. The United States and its allies can also provide police trainers to help reform Egypt's notorious but necessary internal security services.

Conclusion

However strategically ill-advised U.S.-led military operations in Libya may have been, they have likely prevented a siege on civilian population centers by Moammar Gadhafi's forces. Now that UNSCR 1973 – and the interests of the Libyan rebels – have been fulfilled, it is time for the United States to look after its interests. The Obama administration should induce Gadhafi into relinquishing power, cease contributions to direct military operations,

and privately agree not to resume such operations in the event of a return to the *status quo ante bellum*. Politically, Libya is in the European sphere of responsibility. Strategically, for the United States, Libya is of secondary importance that distracts attention from the greater challenges of tomorrow.

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ENDNOTES

1. On "Meet the Press" on March 20, 2011, Sen. John Kerry stated, "The goal of this mission is not to get rid of [Moammar] Gadhafi. That's not what the United Nations licensed and I would not call it going to war. This is a very limited operation that is geared to save lives." The Obama Administration has reportedly briefed the Congress that military operations in Libya do not amount to war. See "W.H. to Hill: We're Not at War," *Politico* (22 March 2011), and "While Libya War Grows, Obama Team Denies It's a War," *Wired.com* (24 March 2011).
2. *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, June 2010, available at <http://www.bp.com>.
3. These estimates are based on calculations done by researchers at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and assume the United States and its allies will enforce only a limited no-fly zone. See "Selected Options and Costs for a No-Fly Zone Over Libya," March 2011, <http://www.csbaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/2011.03.09-Libya-No-Fly-Zone.pdf>. See also "U.S. spending on military operations in Libya drains Pentagon," *The Washington Post* (24 March 2011).
4. Remarks related by CNAS fellow Abraham Denmark from a recent research trip to China in which he met with a wide variety of scholars and officials.
5. "Cost of military campaign in Libya could wipe out GOP's spending cuts," *The Hill* (21 March 2011).
6. See "Shift by Clinton Helped to Push Obama to Take Harder Line," *The New York Times* (18 March 2011).
7. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated this on NBC's "Meet the Press." See "Gates: Libya not 'a vital interest' for US, but part of region that's of vital US interest," *Associated Press* (27 March 2011).
8. See "Sanctions in 72 Hours: How the U.S. pulled off a major freeze of Libyan assets," *The Washington Post* (24 March 2011).
9. Jack Farchy and Roula Khalaf, "Gold key to financing Gaddafi struggle," *The Financial Times* (21 March 2011).
10. See the March 22, 2011 interview with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton conducted by Diane Sawyer of ABC News, <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=13197210>.
11. See Stephen Rademaker, "Obama's missteps on Libya cement Gaddafi's advantage," *The Washington Post* (11 March 2011).
12. "Dislike for Gadhafi Gives Arabs a Point of Unity," *The New York Times* (21 March 2011).

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A black plume of smoke rises from the burning oil refinery in Ras Lanouf, 380 miles southeast of the capital Tripoli, in Libya, March 12, 2011.

(BEN CURTIS/Associated Press)